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The Office of Information and Its Relation to Farm Families
and Family Farm

The Office of Information with agency information divisions in the Department, is intricately woven into the whole fabric of Department activities, into those of Extension, agricultural cooperative and credit agencies, and into the whole web of communication facilities serving the farm population.

Legislative Background

Service to America's farm families is basically the aim of the Department's information work and of that of the cooperating Land Grant Colleges.

That aim stems from the very beginning of the Department in 1862 when the Act establishing it stated that the Department was created "to acquire and diffuse among the people of the United States useful information on subjects connected with Agriculture..."

Since then as the problems of farm families have multiplied and as the business of production and distribution has become more complex the basic directive has been reinforced with 10 subsequent laws to disseminate information in more specific responsibilities legislated to the Department. The most recent and most pointed is the Research and Marketing Act of 1946, directing consumer education and demonstration, as well as dissemination, or more efficient methods of marketing agricultural commodities. In addition, 21 provisions of Federal law require the Department to publish or report statistics and notices, and a detail of 152 other enacted laws call for publication in some form of standards, findings, regulations, warnings, reports, investigations, and various other activities.

Information is Basic to Farm Family Development

Information arising out of agricultural research widely disseminated and demonstrated is the foundation and structure of the development of agriculture in this country. It has made possible the advancement of farm families to their present high standard of living, and has helped family farming to stand free and strong enough to support a democratic people.



The dynamic quality of agricultural research and service programs require active measures to keep up the flow of agricultural information as it develops. By so doing the farm family can maintain and immeasurably strengthen its position as a cornerstone of American life and a symbol of hope to farmers all over the world.

National Policy in Information

The active role of agricultural information is consistent with freedom of the press, radio, and other information media, which is woven into the very framework of our national life. Our constitutional government functioning through the three Federal Branches and State Governments, has jealously guarded that freedom. The three branches of Government in enacting laws, in executing and interpreting them have zealously preserved that freedom in keeping the doors open to workers in press and the other information media.

To further governmental policy in this direction, limiting Federal legislation has been enacted on four principal points: (1) restriction on publication, (2) control by the legislative branch of the Federal printing establishment, (3) a requirement that all Federal information materials can be distributed only as a result of a request for such material, and (4) a rather studied policy of imposing on the Federal Budget structure a sense of hesitancy in appropriating funds for information work. From time to time the policy of limitation has been implemented by investigation reports, declarations in appropriation bill hearings and reports, and requests for reports on volume of information work in executive agencies. This policy too frequently seems to presume that information can be separated from administration in government. As an example, the laws to promote soil conservation whether by technical or incentive methods cannot be executed simply by enactment. Such laws must be implemented year-by-year by authorization of Congress - and the administrator - for use of adequate promotional, including informational resources as well as technicians and materials.

Likewise, Extension agents, "to aid in diffusing" useful and practical information, must have some informational tools through annual appropriation to accomplish its job; so must agricultural credit agencies to make credit sources known to farmers; and foresters to manage and protect the national forests.

Structure and Methods of Operation

Structure

The Office of Information was established under its present name in 1925 as a consolidation of functions, some of which were formally organized as early as 1889, to coordinate in the Department the dissemination of information useful to agriculture as authorized by the Act establishing the Department of Agriculture in 1862.

The Office functions through eight organizational divisions as follows: Director's Office, Divisions of Publications and Special Reports, the Exhibits, Radio, Press and Motion Picture Services, and a Business Office. Exhibits and Motion Picture Services were transferred to the Office in 1943. The Office is prohibited in the annual appropriation act from establishing or maintaining field offices.

Each Department agency and bureau, except the Library and other departmental staff offices, has an information division modeled on the above organizational pattern in less detail and size. Information units operate in the regional offices of the Forest Service and Soil Conservation Service, and in area offices of the Production and Marketing Administration. The cooperating State Extension Services function as state information offices, in cooperation with the editorial offices of the State Experiment Stations. Some Farm Credit districts have information units. All county offices of Department agencies and the cooperating Extension services have some information functions and important public contact responsibilities, most of which touch closely the interests of farm families.

All these information divisions and subdivisions service and supply facts to the established commercial media of communicating intelligence; the facts to be further communicated to farmers and the public or not, as media representatives choose. Department research and service information is either funneled through the Office of Information in Washington to national media channels such as the press associations, radio networks, farm organizations, and printed publications; or funneled back to State Extension Services to undergo local adaptation for media use, use by the farm press and local radio stations; or transmitted to the Extension services and directly to local media channels by agency field offices (with or without information units), and State Extension offices; or channeled through cooperative and credit associations directly to farmer clients.

Methods of Operation

Since the Department was committed from the first to disseminate information, methods of preparing it for ultimate use are geared to the processes of press, radio, and other media of communication. This spreading of information means that an item of Department activity is seldom given out as an isolated bit of information on a one shot or single media basis. For example, one research finding may well be prepared in these forms for immediate and long range use:

| <u>Form</u> | <u>Distribution</u> |
|--------------------|---|
| Technical Bulletin | Research workers, libraries, GPO sale. |
| Leaflet | Libraries, request distribution, Extension services, correspondence, Congressional use. |
| Press Release | Press associations, trade or science press, items in farm editor's letter. |
| Agency Periodical | Item for specialists to explain in correspondence or farmer contact. |
| Clip sheet item | Weekly clip sheet for science press. |
| Radio Release | Inclusion on broadcast, in script for Land Grant college or field application, background item to farm radio directors. |

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| Women's News Release | In Food and Home Notes to women news editors and women radio directors. |
| Technical Magazine | As article by author at subscriber's expense. |
| Science talks | By specialist or in speech of research administrator. |
| Popular Magazine | Item of research feature in national magazine. |
| Extension Specialist demonstration item | Included in talk at meeting or individual conversation in office or on farm. |
| Motion Picture Scene (or Film Strip) | As whole or part subject for a motion picture for demonstration or educational use. |
| Exhibit Showing | Small part in a large fair exhibit, or small group exhibit. |
| Still Picture | In press, magazine, textbook, or display use. |
| Inquiry reply | Verbal answer to a question through knowledge or reference to the written material or by use of the leaflet for quick reply. |

The fanning out of agricultural information could be described at great length. The oldest form, by publication, by annual and special reports, the Agriculture Yearbook and Farmer's Bulletins have been the basic media of bringing information developed by the Department and Land Grant colleges to farm families. These and other publications in newer forms have long served as tools to extension workers serving farm families directly, and as subjects for reporting by the press and radio media. The visual forms of pictures, motion pictures and exhibits are later media involving special problems and mostly pointed toward the dissemination of information to groups or large gatherings of farm families.

Radio is a prime example of direct information to farm families. By radio, the Department and extension workers, enter the farm home and visit with the farm family directly. Some farmers have radio sets in the barn. Others have even installed receivers on their tractors. In general, however, the radio set is a farm family utility. It has shattered for all time the proverbial isolation of the farmstead, and revealed new mutual interests in the farm living room and kitchen.

Radio and the vigorously growing television, not only bring music and entertainment to all members of the family, especially the young folks. They keep the youngsters up on their 4-H activities, provide the farmer with the weather forecasts, market reports, and research findings on which his success often depends, and offer tips and demonstrations immediately useful to the farmer's wife and homemaker.

No component of the American population makes more practical use of radio than does the farm family. And many of the facts that farmers live by are disseminated by the Department's Office of Information and the agencies with which it cooperates.

Every Saturday farm families from coast-to-coast listen to one of the 167 stations of the NBC network broadcasting "The National Farm and Home Hour" and/or one of the 120 stations of the ABC network with the "American Farmer" program.

And every day, practically every minute and every hour of every day, somewhere in this country hundreds of farm families listen to information which originates in the Department. In nearly every agricultural county of the country county agents use some of this information in their own broadcasts. In practically every State, Extension Editors cooperate by coordinating Department and State information for broadcasters they serve. Over 200 commercial radio stations now maintain one or more specialists who devote part or all their time to broadcasting farm information, much of which they get from their contacts with the Department's Office of Information.

Good programming from a radio audience holding viewpoint demands that these programs contain information for the various members of the farm family. Many of these programs combine home demonstration features with those designed to keep the farmer himself abreast of the activities which affect his profession.

As more windmills and silos sprout television aërials, actual demonstration of farm and home practices are being shown in the family circle, as a regular thing. Already, in the sections where television is available to the farm family, it is fast gaining recognition as an educational medium. The Office of Information, the Department, and the Land Grant Colleges now face the problem of how it can best use this medium for the benefit of the farm family at the minimum cost.

Balance in Media Use for the Public Interest

Planning of research or service in agriculture may be relatively exact, but the findings and consequent reports cannot be fully planned in volume nor kind to fit current events in agriculture. The information worker, collaborating with the administrator and the specialist, often must of necessity choose from the total available material that can be disseminated with available resources. The choice is influenced by many factors, importance of the information in improving farming, request for the information, the ease of communicating it, seasonal needs, whether for immediate or longer time use, and finally, the cost of preparing it in usable form and of disseminating it.

Audience is also a factor. An item to educate extension workers themselves, or a cooperative manager may well get adequate coverage in an agency periodical with reference to existing materials. On the other extreme forest fire prevention calls for a full kit of informative materials and a year-round stimulation of attention through all media and channels in city and country.

Cost is too often considered the most important factor in selecting the form to prepare information for its effective distribution. Here the speed of modern mechanics of communication may deceive us into too cheap, and ineffective, a form for dissemination. For example, quickly converting information to a press item or into quickly prepared publication only, may not get the same real result which could be obtained by the higher immediate cost of a television package program or a motion picture to be used over a little longer period, but at a smaller final cost per user.

In more visual form, the user may understand and later apply the information more quickly and much more to his own advantage.

Consideration of Distribution

Within the limits of national policy and law, the distribution of information is all pointed toward the farmer and urban residents, but must remain basically on a request basis. Even the press requests information, or takes the specialist's time from his own work to get it. Federal information workers also try to point to sources of information, and supply the essential facts to guide the writer to get his own story and material at the expense of his private enterprise, rather than at the taxpayer's expense. The bulletins of information issuing from Department sources are on a request basis, planned as far as possible to use as little of appropriated tax money as needed. Press releases and notices of availability of publications, exhibits, motion pictures, go to the primary sources for conversion into the form used by the communication media to bring the notice to farmers and city workers. Many bulletins are available where wanted in agency field offices, in extension offices and in cooperative and credit offices.

The special legislated distribution of farm bulletins and the Agriculture Yearbook through Members of Congress is itself a form of notification. This distribution is limited by the amount of appropriated funds, by annual bulletin quotas to Members of Congress, and by the Member's limitation to specified number of bulletins per correspondent. Beyond notice distribution, and initial free distribution in numbers estimated to reach research workers and farmers, the student and the casual reader goes to the library or to purchase from the Government Printing Office. The only departure from this method is the use of cheap publication reprints to answer information requests, in place of the more costly practice of writing letters. The whole question of distribution of effective information is bound up with the question of cost, particularly first cost. The information job

in the Department's, the bureau's, the administrator's. Information workers, editors, broadcasters, employees having direct contact with the farmer and the public are the prime instruments of disseminating the information the Department is to acquire and disseminate. The basic responsibility is on the administrator to channel sufficient resources into his agency's information work to balance his information output with the rate he develops research findings. The research administrator has the double duty of providing information to get the results applied in practical farming and food handling operations, and to tell other researchers of findings for further research development as well as avoid duplication of research on tax money.

In planning his research or service work the administrator takes full advantage of the latest instruments and methods. The tremendous mass of information from all sources in written, oral, and visual form which beats on the vision and hearing of the American farmer and citizen places a definitive job on the Department to use as well the modern instruments of communication. These modern instruments needed to be put more into use in the Department are visual presentations, and briefer, to-the-point publications. Both categories will be more effective in agricultural distribution channels, whether agency, field office, cooperating extension or cooperative channels, through Congressional offices, the press, radio, television, and national magazines. In the category of visuals are still pictures by themselves, in groupings (such as a "picture story"), and in publications; film strips; motion pictures; picto-graphs; large and small exhibits; and finally, posters of varying size and use. Modernizing publications means chiefly shortening the so-called "popular" publications, and substituting illustrations for text, or using them for specific illustrations to clarify text. Also tying together bulletin illustrations to a film strip, film, or small display used at demonstration meeting, is often not only an effective teaching method, but a more lasting one.

Possibilities for Improvement

Convincing proof of the effectiveness of agricultural information work is found in widespread application of findings of the Department, widespread public understanding of programs of the Department and the constant stream of requests from farm families and others for further information or service from agricultural agencies in the Department and the States. Equally effective work in the future depends partly on greater use of the more modern mechanics of information, - films, television, and illustrated brief publications. These are all pointed toward the farm family directly, whether transmitted through Extension meetings and demonstrations, field office use, through Congressional offices, or television broadcasting channels.

The insistent demand for dissemination of results under the Research and Marketing Act adds to the drive for more information resources to report the research to research workers in the traditional pattern, but then to go on to educate consumers, and to put new marketing information into the hands of processors and handlers of agricultural products, stopping nowhere short of the final user. The application of the research information developed is definitely beneficial to the stabilization of family farms, even though the effect is indirect and mainly through better income, more food reaching the consumer with less waste and less costly handling.

Another area for improvement lies in the field of planning publications. To the extent Department workers know in advance what publications are planned in the States and vice versa, available funds in both places can be more effectively utilized year by year to meet current needs. A system of exchanging publication plans for a year in advance proved very successful from 1944 to 1947, when it was discontinued through lack of resources in the Department.

A small number of information field offices of the Office of Information would be extremely useful in this area, as well as in other phases of Department operations. There is an increasing trend toward issuance of regional publications by groups of Department offices and experiment stations. These could be coordinated with Department publication practices through a few field information offices. Otherwise such offices would be immensely helpful to Department agencies on regional problems, and often provide direct assistance to agencies in spot problems arising of unusual or seasonal weather or crop conditions, or unusual situations such as the present mobilization effort.

Recommendations

This report has necessarily dealt with the Department's whole information operation, which the Office of Information spearheads, edits, coordinates, and serves as the main outlet to national media, and to the farm press, and radio. This operation is subject to the general interest of a very large part of the American public who ask for information from the Department, but is also subject to the special interests of the daily, farm, and science press, the network and farm radio, national publishers, fair associations, motion picture distributors, the extension services, and the Congress itself. The entire group of interests is based on desire to serve all farm families and interested city people. To fit the desires of all these interests, as a means of better serving farm families, basic improvements must come from Department agencies. The more important areas for improvement are:

1. Revision of outstanding popular publications to shorten and make them more pointed to current agricultural practice. This can be achieved through some expansion in writer staffs in Department agencies to revise publications for popular use.
2. Expansion in use of television as a direct medium, partly through preparation of film for television use.

3. A program for annual production of a planned group of agricultural films mainly on demonstrational subjects, for better information to farm families.
4. Expand the use of radio tape recordings and establish a tape recording exchange for more effective dissemination of information from the Department and information between States.
5. Revival of publications planning method to keep Department and State specialists informed of each other's publication plans one to two years in advance. More effective planning in this area would provide more new publications with the same or less resources, and therefore would directly promote economy in use of appropriated funds.
6. Establishment of a small information field staff of the Office of Information for coordination of Department information work. The field staffs would provide needed technical assistance in publication and printing problems to agency field workers, rather than serve as issuing offices.
7. Reinstitution of radio training schools for State extension specialists and field employees, and expansion of such training to include television guidance to improve the information output which goes directly through these channels to farm families.
8. Establishment of a current progress report to digest progressive research developments for the information of research workers, and to promote wider application of research by providing basic references for private writers on research subjects to follow up.
9. Establishment of a trade press service unit in the Office of Information to funnel out for faster application the marketing research findings under the Research and Marketing Act.

Additional Legislation

To effect the recommendation for an information field service, it would be necessary to remove the prohibition on maintenance of field offices by the Office of Information.

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